

The rules of football evolve along with the game in an effort to promote better player safety. To this end, playing rules are reviewed annually by the Competition Committee, with guidance from the Player Safety Advisory Panel, the Owners' Committee on Health and Safety, the Head, Neck and Spine Committee, and other health and safety related NFL committees. Input is also solicited from the NFL Players Association, NFL players and coaches. This annual review by the Competition Committee identifies opportunities to further promote player health and safety through rule changes and special points of emphasis. For the 2013 season, several rule changes were approved that are expected to improve protection for both offensive and defensive players.

The following rule changes focusing on protecting player health and safety will be enacted for the 2013 season:

- The definition of "defenseless player" was expanded to include the offensive player who attempts a snap (long-snapper) during a field goal attempt or point after touchdown (PAT) and the player who receives a blindside block when the blocker is moving toward or parallel to his own end line and approaches the opponent from behind or from the side.
- During a punt, field-goal attempt, or a PAT kick, a defensive player who is within one yard of the line of scrimmage must have his entire body outside of the snapper's shoulder pads, in an effort to protect the defenseless long-snapper.
- During a field-goal attempt or a PAT kick, no more than six defensive players may be on the line of scrimmage on either side of the snapper at the snap.
- A player who is aligned in the tackle box when the ball is snapped cannot initiate contact on the side and below the waist against an opponent if: a) the blocker is moving towards his own end line; and b) he approaches the opponent from behind or from the side. This rule effectively makes a "peel back" block below the waist illegal in the tackle box (an area extending from tackle to tackle and from three yards beyond the line of scrimmage to the offensive team's end line).
- It is a foul if a runner or tackler initiates forcible contact by delivering a blow with the top/crown of his helmet against an opponent when both players are clearly outside the tackle box. Incidental contact by the helmet of a runner or tackler against an opponent would not be deemed a foul.

Mandatory Protective Equipment

Protective thigh and knee equipment usage will be mandatory for players beginning in 2013. The initiative was approved in 2012, and the league has coordinated with the NFL Players Association and equipment manufacturers to encourage the development of lighter, stronger and more comfortable thigh and knee pads. The use of protective thigh and knee equipment will be enforced just as the use of helmets or shoulder pads. Game day uniform inspectors evaluate each player and then work with designated team officials to ensure adjustments are made as needed. Players in violation during games are allowed an opportunity to make proper adjustments before penalties are assessed. Prior to the start of the 2013 season, each team's uniform inspector provided a presentation during training camp, league representatives toured the clubs to share information and players were provided details on approved protective equipment.

"All we're doing is re-introducing the core fundamentals that the game is built on. Now it's more important than ever to lead with your shoulder pads."

— Merril Hoge, former NFL player

A sample of the new thigh pads made mandatory equipment for the 2013 football season (AP Photo/David Goldman)

